

September 11, 2008 - Chairwoman Slaughter Urges Congress to Protect Key Women's History Landmarks

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Chairwoman Slaughter Urges Congress to Protect Key Women's History Landmarks in New York

Slaughter Testifies At Subcommittee Hearing in Support of Women's History Legislation

Washington, DC - House Rules Committee Chairwoman Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28) today called on Congress to pass the National Women's Rights History Project Act, legislation she authored to preserve and promote historic sites critical to the suffrage movement.

During her testimony before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Chairwoman Slaughter

highlighted the importance of honoring the achievements of all those who fought for suffrage.

"The foremothers of our country stood up to injustice and by changing the course of history, opened the doors of opportunity for all America's daughters," Slaughter said. "I urge my colleagues to join me celebrating the accomplishments of the heroines who put our great nation on track to equality by supporting this bill."

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), the leading sponsor of the Senate version of the bill, gave testimony to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks in July.

BACKGROUND

The National Women's Rights History Project Act (H.R. 3114) does the following:

- Creates a Women's History Auto Trail: This bill will establish an auto trail linking women's suffrage movement sites between Syracuse, NY through the Finger Lakes region and to Rochester, NY. This is where many of the most prominent sites are concentrated, including Seneca Falls and Waterloo, where the first women's rights conventions were planned and held.

- Expand National Online Registry of Key Women's History Sites: Second, the bill will expand the current National Registry travel itinerary website, "Places Where Women Made History," to include additional historic sites. Currently, only 44 percent of the 298 sites nationwide that are relevant to women's rights are listed on the national register of historic places. Of those, only 57 are national historic landmarks. Moreover, many of the register sites have not been evaluated for their association with women's history but rather are on the registry because they are significant in other areas.

- Establishes a National Women's Rights History Project Partnership: Finally, the bill will require the Department of Interior to establish a partnership-based network to offer financial and technical assistance for interpretive and educational program development of national women's rights history. The Project Partnership would be managed by a non-governmental entity to provide grants and technical assistance for educational and preservation purposes.

The full text of Chairwoman Slaughter's testimony, as prepared, can be found below:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before your subcommittee today about the National Women's Rights History Project Act.

It was only 88 years ago that women finally secured the right to vote.

And few Americans have any real knowledge of the long struggle to obtain these rights that we take for granted today. The National Women's Rights History Project Act will provide Americans with the opportunity to learn more about the female heroes that fought tirelessly to secure these rights.

This year marks the 160th anniversary of the first ever women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. It was there, on July 19, 1848, that a group of activists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Mary Ann M'Clintock convened the first Women's Rights Convention at Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls. During the Convention, 68 women and 32 men signed the Declaration of Sentiments, which was drafted to mirror the Declaration of Independence and set out "radical" notions like women's freedom to own property, receive an education, and file for divorce. It was this event that heralded the beginning of a 72-year struggle for suffrage.

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was formed.

Susan B. Anthony also established the Equal Rights Association to refute ideas that women were inferior to men and fight for a woman's right to vote. In 1872, Susan B. Anthony and other women voted in the presidential election. They were promptly arrested and fined for illegal voting. At her trial, which attracted nationwide attention, Susan B. Anthony made a speech that ended with the slogan "Resistance to Tyranny Is Obedience to God." She also campaigned for the rights of women to own property, to keep their own earnings, and to have custody of their children. I am especially proud that it was in Rochester, New York that Susan B. Anthony fought so hard for the rights that women throughout this country rely on today. In fact, in 1900, she persuaded the University of Rochester, in my Congressional District, to admit women.

In the early 1900s, a new generation of leaders joined the women's suffrage movement, including Carrie Chapman Catt, Maud Wood Park, Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, and Harriot E. Blatch. During this era, the Women's Rights movement increased its momentum by organizing marches, pickets and other protests. Suffragette Alice Paul and other activists began chaining themselves to the White House fence and participating in hunger strikes to gain the attention of Congress.

The struggle for women's suffrage was not easy, and oftentimes it was made more difficult as a consequence of public misinformation and fear. Consider these remarks which, in 1912, appeared in the New York Times under the title, "The Uprising of Women":

"The vote will secure to woman no new privilege that she either deserves or requires... Women will get the vote and play havoc with it for themselves and society, if men are not wise and firm enough and it may as well be said, masculine enough, to prevent them."

If by playing havoc, the New York Times meant becoming the single most sought after voting block in the country that often determines the outcome of elections, I guess they were right.

Because of the persistent dedication of Susan B. Anthony and other remarkable leaders, women persevered. Although Susan B. Anthony was not alive to see it, the efforts of the women's rights struggle came to fruition when the Nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was finally passed by Congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920.

We have clearly come a long way in 88 years - and we still have a long way to go. I can remember just a few decades ago, when Geraldine Ferraro was running for vice president and other women bread winners still had to have their husbands co-sign for credit cards and other loans. And of course, we all know that women are still making just 75 cents on the dollar for equal work.

It's imperative that we continue the momentum that started in Seneca Falls, by not only ensuring that all women vote, but that they do so with an understanding of the long fight to obtain this right and with a sense of responsibility to do their part in the struggle for women's equality.

That's precisely the objective of the National Women's Rights History Project Act. This bill has three components that come directly from the Women's Rights National History Trail Feasibility Study, which I commissioned in 1998 and which was completed in 2002. Specifically, this bill will establish a trail route linking sites significant to the struggle for women's suffrage and civil rights. It also will expand the current National Register travel itinerary website, "Places Where Women Made History," to include additional historic sites. Finally, this bill will require the Department of Interior to establish a partnership-based network to offer financial and technical assistance for interpretive and educational program development of national women's rights history.

I will touch briefly on all three components.

I. the Auto Trail

Section 2 of my bill would establish an auto trail linking women's suffrage movement sites between Syracuse, NY through the Finger Lakes region and to Rochester, NY. This is where many of the most prominent sites are concentrated, including Seneca Falls and Waterloo, where the first women's rights conventions were planned and held.

II. Registry/Website

Section 3 establishes a registry to provide grants to state historic preservation offices to identify women's history sites to be listed on the national register of historic places.

Only 44% of the 298 sites identified in the feasibility study as relevant to women's rights are listed on the national register of historic places. Of those, only 57 are national historic landmarks. Moreover, many of the register sites have not been evaluated for their association with women's history but rather are on the registry because they are significant in other areas. The feasibility study suggests that the National Register documentation should be updated to illuminate the history of the women's rights movement associated with these sites.

III. The Partnership Network

The final component, section 4 of HR 3114, establishes a National Women's Rights History Project Partnership, managed by a non-governmental entity to provide grants and technical assistance for educational and preservation purposes.

The foremothers of this country have fought tirelessly to achieve equal rights for our grandmothers, our mothers, ourselves, and our daughters.

These brave women stood up to injustice and by changing history, opened new possibilities for all of America's daughters and every generation to come.

It is my hope that this bill will provide Americans with the opportunity to learn more about the female leaders who struggled to put our great nation on track to equality.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all Members to join me in celebrating their accomplishments by supporting the National Women's Rights History Project Act.

Thank you again for permitting me to testify here today.

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